

## Natural Heritage Resources Factsheet

### Virginia Sneezeweed (*Helenium virginicum*)



#### Description

Virginia sneezeweed is a rare wildflower found only in Virginia. An herbaceous perennial in the Aster family, its stems grow 1.5 to 3.5 feet above a rosette of basal leaves. Coarse hairs are visible on the basal and lower stem leaves. The basal leaves may be broad in the middle tapering towards the ends, but others may appear oblong. Stem leaves are lance-shaped, and become progressively smaller as they go up the stem. The stems are "winged," the wings being continuous with the bases of the stem leaves. The flower ray petals are yellow, and wedge-shaped with three lobes at the ends. The central disk of the flower is nearly ball-shaped. Flowering occurs from July to October. Virginia sneezeweed closely resembles common sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*). The two are differentiated by a number of characteristics including leaf shape, stem and leaf hairs, and habitat requirements.

#### Habitat and Distribution

First discovered in 1936, Virginia sneezeweed is a wetland species found only on the shores of shallow, seasonally flooded ponds in Virginia's Augusta and Rockingham Counties. Extensive field work in the more than 100 limestone sinkhole ponds along the western edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Shenandoah Valley has resulted in fewer than 30 known sites for this plant. Ranging in size from a tenth of an acre to eight acres, the ponds may be seasonally flooded, semipermanent to permanent bodies of water. The ponds supporting Virginia sneezeweed have poorly drained, acidic, silty loam soils, and are generally flooded from January to July. Other characteristic plants found with Virginia sneezeweed on the pond shore include least spikerush, warty panic grass, northern St. John's wort, long-leaved panic grass, black-fruited spikerush, and narrow-leaved violet.

#### Life History

Virginia sneezeweed has adapted to survive the water level fluctuations of the seasonal ponds, giving it competitive advantage in this habitat. From year to year, Virginia sneezeweed populations may greatly vary. High water level on year may leave the ponds flooded, resulting in less shoreline for plants to establish or survive. However, a high water level also eliminates invading shrubs and trees which try to colonize the pond shores. When water levels are lower, more pond shore is exposed. This allows a sneezeweed population to bounce back from surviving plants and seeds stored in the soil.

#### Conservation

Virginia sneezeweed is listed as endangered in Virginia, and is also Federally listed as threatened. Five populations are within the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests

and many others are found on private lands. The life cycle of Virginia sneezeweed is closely tied to the natural hydrologic regime of the ponds and the low nutrient conditions of the acidic soils. Wetland habitats are vulnerable to land uses which may result in erosion, siltation, toxic or nutrient runoff, permanent flooding, dredging, or draining. Landowners can protect sinkhole ponds against these effects by following Best Management Practices which maintain or protect water quality and quantity in this fragile wetland communities. Land uses in surrounding uplands should be carefully evaluated to avoid activities that may result in hydrologic changes and increased nutrient inputs into the ponds. If you find a plant you think may be Virginia sneezeweed, take note of the location as precisely as possible and photograph the plant. **DO NOT PICK THE PLANT!** Notify the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage.

Landowners and managers can take positive steps to ensure conservation of Virginia sneezeweed and its habitat. Knowledge of the presence of rare species and of Best Management Practices for their habitat contribute to informed land use decisions. DCR's Division of Natural Heritage maintains a database on the presence of our state's natural heritage occurrences. Natural Heritage inventory biologists, stewardship, information, and protection staff can assist landowners with questions regarding rare species and sensitive habitats. The staff also provides information and expertise concerning conservation and ecological management practices which help to maintain ensure Virginian's preserve and pass on to future generations the tremendous gifts of life which are in our care.